

Christian Fasting

Lesson 1

Definitions

Christian fasting is “sanctifying a day to the Lord by a willing abstinence from food and drink, and from pleasures and trades, in order that the whole man may be more thoroughly humbled before God and more fervent in prayer.” (Scudder)

Fasting is “the devotion of the whole man to a solemn, extraordinary attendance upon God, in a particular time separated for that end, for the removing of His displeasure and the seeking of His favor, joined with an abstinence from bodily food and delights and secular affairs.” (Barker)

Fasting is “a season of special, earnest, elevated devotion; prompted by special feelings; consecrated to a special object; and accompanied by those special circumstances of humility which indicate a soul deeply abased before God and fervently engaged in pleading for His blessing;” and it’s as such that *fasting is* “a precious auxiliary to devotion.” (Miller)

Fasting is “a special religious exercise in which a believer deprives himself for a day from all that invigorates the body, humbling himself in body and soul before God as a means to obtain what he desires [cf. WSC 98].” (à Brakel)

- I. Fasting is a Christian duty.
 - A. God instituted fasting as a means of grace.
 1. Fasting is a divine institution commanded in both testaments, Lev 16.29-31; 23.26-32; Joel 1.14; Isa 58.6; Mt 6.16-18; 9.14-15
 2. As a divine institution, then, fasting is by nature a *religious exercise*—an exercise in which one *seeks after God*. Fasting is God-focused and its intent is to seek God. It’s not a day of idleness or mere abstinence, but consists of religious dealings with God. Thus, WCF 21.5 includes it *as an element of religious worship*, albeit only upon “special occasions”.
 - B. Christ began His ministry with a season of prayer and fasting, Mt 4.1-2. Christ’s observing of a religious fast as our legal representative to God shows that God requires it of us, Gal 4.4-5
 - C. Our heavenly Father takes note of and answers our fasting, Mt 6.17-18
 - D. Scripture gives many illustrations of God’s people seeking Him by fasting, both privately and corporately.
 1. Joshua and the elders of Israel kept a solemn fast when their people were defeated by the men of Ai, Josh 7.6
 2. David fasted and prayed, humbled under God’s chastising hand, 2Sam 12.16
 3. Even the hardened Ahab fasted and cried out to God, 1Kgs 21.17-19, 27-29
 4. Nehemiah fasted for many days when he heard of the desolations of Jerusalem, Neh 1.4
 5. Jehoshaphat appointed a day of fasting and prayer when the Ammonites and Moabites came upon against Judah, 2Chr 20.1-4
 6. Nineveh fasted after Jonah preached to them, Jon 3.7-8
 7. Esther called all her people to fast for her in the face of Human’s conspiracy, Esther 4.16
 8. Ezra called all the returning exiles to fast and seek God for safety on their journey to Jerusalem, Ezra 8.21
 9. Daniel sought the Lord fervently with fasting when he repented of his and Israel’s sins, Dan 9.1-3
 10. Anna was regularly engaged in fasting as she awaited the Lord’s salvation, Lk 2.37
 11. Paul and Barnabas were set apart by the church to service after a season of prayer and fasting, Acts 13.1-3
 12. The apostles set apart men for the office of elder by fasting and prayer, Acts 14.23

- E. Scripture encourages fasting as an *effective* means of grace by showing how God answered His people who sought Him by this means.
 1. The blessing of God attended the exercise of fasting in every one of the aforementioned instances: The armies of Joshua were victorious. David was forgiven. Ahab, though impenitent, had his judgment delayed. Nehemiah was granted favor with the king. Jehoshaphat triumphed. Nineveh, though guilty, was spared. Esther and the Jews were delivered. Ezra and the exiles were blessed with safety. Daniel was blessed with visions of God and visits from an angel. Paul and Barnabas were greatly successful in their ministry as missionaries. The NT churches were blessed with godly elders.
- II. As to its frequency and extent, fasting is a matter of conscience.
 - A. Although fasting is a duty incumbent upon every believer as an instituted part of religious worship, Scripture gives no rule or law to govern the *frequency* and *extent* of it. There are no days of the week (e.g. Tuesdays and Thursdays) or year (e.g. Lent or Ramadan) on which the Scriptures require a Christian to fast. All requirements imposed upon men as necessary to salvation or sanctification are unbiblical. The whole subject is left to every man's conscience in the sight of God.
 - B. Our Lord said, "*when* [not *if*] you fast", expecting that we'll give ourselves to fasting as often the occasion for it arises, Dan 9.1-4; WCF 21.5
 - C. However, it's right that the church should be called by its ministers and elders to a *public fast* to seek God as a church, when the occasion warrants it, 2Chr 20.1-4; Ezra 8.21; Esther 4.16; Joel 2.14; cf. DPW V.A.4. (*More on public/corporate fasts next time).
- III. Fasting has two parts—both of which are necessary and in the second of which is the efficacy. These two parts function in unison; indeed, each one is nothing without the other. Fasting the body *religiously* has but one purpose: the humbling of the soul; it has no significance apart from that.
 - A. The *outward* part, the afflicting of the body, Dan 9.3; Ps 35.13-14; Mt 4.2
 1. Abstaining from food and sustenance, Esther 4.16—although not so far as to be *harmful* to our health or a *hindrance* to the spiritual duties for which the fast is taken.
 - a) Fasting is necessarily an affliction to the body. Indeed, the point of the abstinence is to "bring the body for that given day into a condition of withdrawal, distress, pliability, and weakness" (à Brakel) for the purposes of seeking God from a place of destitution and dependence (*more on this later*).
 2. Abstaining from pleasures that would hinder a sincere humiliation before God on account of our sins, Joel 1.8-16; 2.12-17
 3. Abstaining from worldly business and labor. Like a Sabbath day, a fast day should be entirely devoted to God for the heartwork at hand.
 - B. The *inward* part, the afflicting of the soul, Lev 16.29-31; 23.26-32; Isa 58.5
 1. This is the essential and effectual part, the part for which the outward part is observed, Dan 9.3-4
 - a) A mere outward fast is no fast to God and will not be blessed, Isa 58. Likewise, a mere "inward/heart fast" misses the point and is no fast at all because it's the afflicting of the body that provides the occasion and stage for the afflicting of the soul which is at the heart of the fast.
 - b) The afflicting of the body confronts us with our utter dependence upon God and His gifts, facilitates humility, and causes us to call upon God with the disposition of one who is entirely destitute.
 2. The inward afflicting of the soul consists primarily in:
 - a) Confessing our sins, with grief and shame, Neh 9.1-2; Ezra 9.5-6; Dan 9.3-8

- (1) We must get a good look at our sins, our sinfulness, and what we deserve—and would receive if God treated us accordingly. This pricking of the heart with godly sorrow and mourning for sin is the beginning of true Christian fasting. It's the principal part of fasting, Joel 2.12-17; Mt 9.15; Ps 30.11; Isa 61.2-3
- (2) A humble and particular confession of known sins, Dan 9; Neh 1; Ezk 9.4.
 - (a) *To help with this*, we should examine ourselves by the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, 1Cor 12-13; Rom 12-15; Eph 4-6; Col 3-4; Phil 2-4, &c.
- (3) The more honest you are with God about your sins, the more gracious He'll be with you about them. He's provided an atonement by which they can all be forgiven, but you must bring them to Him and own them before Him.
- b) Declaring ourselves to be deserving of God's judgment and confessing that any judgment presently upon us is just, Ezra 9.7, 15; Neh 9.32-33; Ps 51.3-4; Dan 9.7, 11-15
- c) Pleading with our God that He might forgive us our sins and have mercy upon us, Dan 9.15-19; Joel 2.15-17
- d) Renewing our covenant with God with a wholehearted intent to forsake former sins and live a godly life, Neh 9.38; 10.28-39; Isa 58.6
 - (1) We must resolve by the grace of God, out of a love for God, and out of a sincere hatred for sin, to turn from all known sin and embrace all known duty. Resolve, by the assistance of God's grace, never to commit those sins again which you mourned in your fast.
 - (2) Turning from sin is one of the chief ends in view in fasting. The Lord abhors a fast from food that is not also a fast from sin, Isa 1.13; 58.3; Zech 7.4-6. "It's not the vacuity of the stomach, but the purity of the heart, that God respects" (Bayly).
- e) Praying—humble, fervent prayer to God, Neh 9.1-4; Ezra 9.3-6; 10.1
 - (1) The day of fasting, before all else, is a day of great and fervent prayer. This is the chief business of the day because it's a day devoted to seeking and laying hold of God. Everything else done on a fast day is designed to make way for freer, more fervent prayer.
 - (2) Implore God's mercy, whether in the pardon of your sins, the removal of calamity, the lifting of judgments, or in the special graces of mortification and quickening.
 - (3) Pray for the good sought. Pray against the evil faced. Pray with fervency of spirit. Strive and wrestle in prayer. Pray with a heart broken over your sins and with a faith confident in Christ. Humble yourself in the dust of your confession. Lay hold of Christ. Draw near to God. Seek the blessing desired. None who so seek Him will go home empty-handed.
 - (4) Pray for yourself, your family, your congregation, your denomination, your nation, your world. Stand in the breach. Be importunate. You stand at the right door; don't go home without the blessing, Ezra 9.15; Neh 9.32; Dan 9.20-23